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Candidates reshaped by technology?

In doing some recent historical research on dictators of the left and of the right, I became interested in how often a leader like Fidel Castro mentioned terms such as "popular acclamation" or "direct democracy" or even "plebiscitary democracy."

These words of approval of Mr. Castro as a leader by the people reverberated across his incredible political life in an attempt to prove that what was profoundly non-democratic was indeed democratic. For what charismatic and basically totalitarian leaders, such as Mr. Castro, are doing is what the East Bloc countries also do in calling themselves "pure democracies." They are deliberately trying to be the one thing they most definitely are not.

As we watch the Super Tuesday primaries today — less a serious political watershed than a college football game — we are facing something like that same political dissembling in our own elections.

Indeed, as Larry Sabato, political consultant and professor of the University of Virginia, said at a recent Annenberg Washington Program here on "New Technologies and Political Communications": "New technologies promote 'pure democracy' vs. our society, which has representative democracy ...."

Let us pause here for a moment to remember that Abraham Lincoln, according to James Russell Lowell, "always addressed the intelligences of men, never their prejudices, their passions or their ignorance." Why then, in this election so far have most of the candidates purposely addressed their fellow citizens' prejudices, passions and ignorance?

In large part it is because of the new methods of electoral choosing — selecting candidates through caucuses and primaries, and thus through impassioned ideologues and special-interest groups instead of through the party elders' old smoke-filled rooms. But it is also because of the new electoral technologies that accompany these changes.

We now have "focus groups" of chosen citizens tested in "instant pulsing," in which pseudoscientific random samplings of what a person feels about a candidate at that moment can profoundly skew the results — not to speak of the ease with which these results can be manipulated by special-interest groups.

We now have political consultants using that technology and making all sorts of decisions based upon it. We have "advanced mapping" of previously untouched electorates being used to create new "monodistricts" of segments of society not before reached.

S. Robert Lichter of the American Enterprise Institute, one of the best thinkers on these new themes, concludes: "The whole campaign becomes structured as to how you get your candidates on television. ... The idea is that the television audience is the new electorate ... and this has affected the electoral process enormously."

What so often comes out of this process, of course, is the political actor, less a Ronald Reagan (who is a true actor), than a putative politician who is in truth a man who is acting.

As Milton Rosenberg, professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, says: "It is a question of centralism vs. peripheralism. Actors tend to be peripheralists; they lack an inner core. This is why they imitate so well. They have an alternate identity. But once the person enacts it, the act becomes real to him, whereas with the centralist,

there is an inside being there that acts genuinely."

Due to these new techniques and technologies, and due to the different types of men and women that they spawn and push forward to

power and fame, many analysts and political thinkers fear that our entire political power structure will change. Many worry that these primarily emotive technologies, based on the power of television, will foster the election of far-left or far-right charismatic leaders who could be unrepresentative of the majority of the American people and who little understand the real problems facing us.

There isn't any question about whether the use of these new technologies is going to end. It is not.

"What will we see in the 1990s?" John Phillips, head of Aristotle Industries, the largest company of computerized software for campaigns, asked at the Annenberg meeting. "We're going to see greater use at the grass-roots level of various technologies. We'll see for the first time the use of microcomputers in districting, and also for the first time a greater use of expert systems and of artificial intelligence."

What can the serious voter do? At the moment, until we know more about the political and psychological effects of these technologies, we can only be aware of them.